

RECORD



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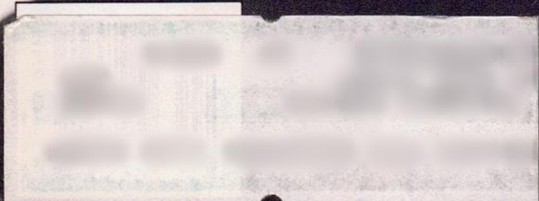
DAVID BYRNE

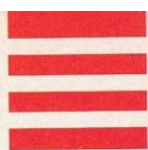
A HEAD AND HIS TIMES

**HUEY
LEWIS**
NEW SOUNDS,
OLD EMOTIONS

**SPANDAU
BALLET**
TRUE OR FALSE?

DEBARGE
MOTOWN'S FIRST FAMILY





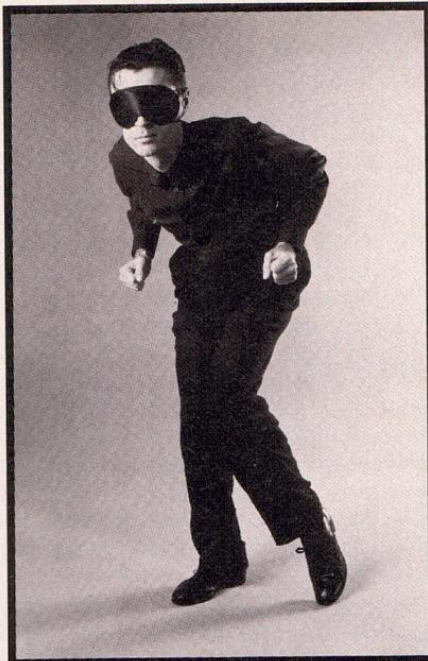
THE RECORD
INTERVIEW

BY ANTHONY DECURTIS

DAVID BYRNE



A HEAD AND HIS TIMES



SINCE EMERGING FROM THE NEW York underground in late 1977, Talking Heads have set the standard for progressive music that rocks both the mind and body. Their debut LP, *Talking Heads 77*, fused catchy, wound-tight rhythms drawn from soul music and white pop with edgy lyrics that depicted love as a dangerous distraction from work, extolled the virtues of civil servants, and celebrated a polyglot "psycho killer" incited to violence by boring conversation and bad manners. Clearly, a weird new day had dawned in American music.

Four subsequent studio albums have consistently refined and developed the compelling synthesis the Heads' first record forged. Singer-guitarist David Byrne, keyboardist Jerry Harrison, bassist Tina Weymouth,

and drummer Chris Frantz seemed driven to repel complacency; the band pushed to greater avant-rock heights with each release, while deepening their funk groove.

The Heads' artistic breakthrough came with the 1980 masterwork, *Remain in Light*. Under the guidance of all-purpose experimentalist Brian Eno, who had produced their *More Songs About Buildings and Food* (1978) and *Fear of Music* (1979) LPs, the band expanded its four-person line-up to incorporate more percussion, a fatter bass sound, richer keyboard textures, and a host of ideas derived from an intense immersion in African and other tribal aesthetics. The result was satisfying on virtually every level. Not only was the concept intellectually visionary, but the Heads' live shows with the ten-piece band were raucous, funk-up stomps that left audiences in sweat-soaked wonder.

Commercial success finally came in 1983, when the dance-groove "Burning Down the House" soared into the Top Ten, carrying *Speaking in Tongues*, their fifth studio LP, along with it. This popular recognition came not a moment too soon. *Speaking in Tongues* arrived on the heels of a spate of solo projects that had Heads fans concerned about the band's possible break-up. Byrne had collaborated with Eno on the theory-laden, ethno-disco LP, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, composed the score for choreographer Twyla Tharp's performance piece, *The Catherine Wheel*, and produced records by The B-52's (*Mesopotamia*) and Fun Boy Three (*Waiting*). Frantz and Weymouth headed for the tropics with Tina's sisters and some friends, invented the Tom Tom Club, and scored a hit with the street music soul homage, "Genius of Love." For his part, Jerry Harrison delivered an ominous, darkly textured funk study, *The Red and the Black*.

Speaking in Tongues draws life from all these sources, and has left the band not only richer, but more unified than before. And sitting at the heart of the Head's unity like a tense, art-boy Buddha is 31-year old David Byrne. Wrapped in a long, black coat that made him appear even paler and more attenuated than he is, Byrne sidled in for our interview at precisely the appointed time. After scouring around for an ash tray and some black coffee, he was ready to begin work. Cooperative, gracious, and painstakingly thoughtful in his responses, Byrne continuously rearranged himself in his chair, as if physical comfort were an ideal he believed one should ceaselessly strive for but could never seriously hope to attain. After each question was presented, and occasionally in mid-sentence, he would think silently for extended periods, seemingly considering both exactly what he wanted to say and what his questioner's justifiable expectations were.

When he felt his answers were completed, which was not always apparent by any means, he would simply stop speaking. If I hesitated too long against the possibility that he might want to say more, he'd eventually look up with a benign expression that implied it was perfectly fine if I wanted to sit with him in utter silence, but another question would be okay too.

Byrne would occasionally chuckle and glance over shyly when he said something humorous. His obvious, if controlled, delight at these moments suggested that he inwardly believed these remarks to be hilariously funny, but thought it might be immodest to take too much public enjoyment in his own wit.

All in all, I can't really agree with Byrne when he brays in "Burning Down the House" that he's an "or-di-na-ry guy." He's still pretty strange, folks, and very special.





When Talking Heads first formed as a trio in 1976, with you, Tina Weymouth, and Chris Frantz, did you have any ideas about why you were forming a band, what you felt you could add that was missing from the musical scene?

I think that like a lot of other bands at that time here and in England, we weren't hearing the kind of music on the radio that we felt spoke to us, or we were hearing a lot less of it than we wanted to. So we felt we had to make it for ourselves and for each

other. Why a band rather than something else? I suppose it probably runs through a lot of people's heads in our generation to be in a band at one point or another when they're growing up. I think Chris said once that if we didn't at least try it, even if we failed, we'd probably kick ourselves. So we tried it. We grew up with the notion that it was something you could do and be creative on your own terms, and yet speak to a real mass audience, speak to your peers, speak to people who were older than you and younger than you. There was no set audience or set lines you had to follow. It was a pretty free and open area to work in. I must say, for me the big attraction was that it was mass-produced and it's part of mass culture, but yet it has the kind of creativity in it that's as good as anything going.

You spent a great deal of time in the early days, when The Talking Heads were beginning to get some attention, distinguishing yourself from other bands like The Ramones, Blondie, and Television on the new wave circuit in New York. At this point can you look back and see some of the similarities among the things you were all trying to do?

Yeah, there were a fair number of similarities, not so much in the directions we were going in or what we were trying to do musically, but in the fact that at the time a lot of the major rock bands had gotten very big and pompous. You couldn't go from

nowhere to being big and pompous. You couldn't go from practicing in a loft or in your basement to being a huge act. That just seemed totally improbable. The major acts seemed to be making a kind of music and presentation that was really distant and inaccessible. So I think a lot of bands wanted to bring their music down to a closer level, a level that maybe was more intimate with the audience and that they could handle. A lot of the bands got lumped together at the time musically, but it was obvious to the musicians that, given their druthers, they'd go in very different directions.

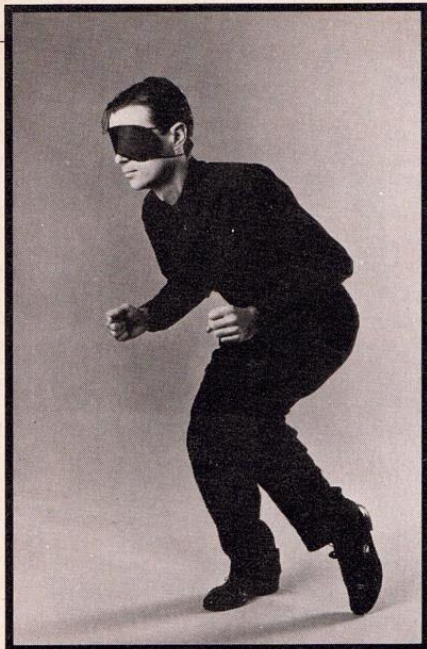
Many people seemed to feel that *Talking Heads 77* over-refined the band's live sound at that point. Were you happy with it when it came out, and how do you feel about it now?

At the time we thought it was okay, but I don't think we were completely *thrilled* with it. But hardly anybody's thrilled with their first record, because their first record represents everything they've been doing and everything they feel they are. I mean, it's their first shot at getting across what they represent or what they feel is in their soul. And if it doesn't say *all that* in one record, they're disappointed. Looking back on it now, it seems a lot more quirky and peculiar than I thought it was then.

How did your working relationship with Eno come about?



PHOTO: BARRY MCKINLEY



Just before that first album came out, we had a single out which he had heard in England. We went over to play there as a support act for The Ramones, and on one of their off days we played a date in a little club in London, and he and John Cale came and saw us. We had known John Cale before, but that was our first meeting with Brian, and we quite liked him and hung out with him for a while. Then he came to New York on a vacation and we chatted and hung out together then. So we sort of just got to know him. It might have been almost a year that went by before we got around to making another record, and it seemed natural to ask him to produce, since we already knew him and liked some of the things he'd done. We were still a little unsure of ourselves, and it would have been difficult for us to work with someone else who maybe was a very good producer, but who overpowered us.

Do you feel Eno's involvement with the band eventually became divisive?

It's hard to say whether it was just him. When we were making *Remain in Light*, he and I had formed a close relationship, because we had already been working on the *Bush of Ghosts* record. And so that set up some sort of split between he and I, who had a close working relationship, and the rest of the band, who weren't so close to the main songwriter and the producer any more. So that made things a little difficult. It didn't *have* to, but it did. We were both very excited about what we thought was this new kind of music, this new kind of synthesis, that we were working on, and we were fairly determined that that was the future, and we wanted to keep going in that direction with the band. And the band did too. But at the same time, we sort of felt that it was "our idea" or something like that, which was probably a bad thing.

You once said you and Eno felt at that time that you were on some kind of "mission."

VITAL TRACKS: A BYRNE'S EYE-VIEW

BECAUSE IT SEEMED THAT BYRNE WAS BEING, BY HIS OWN STANDARD, open and candid during our interview, I decided to ask him directly about what I regard as some key Heads tracks. At points he seemed a bit uncomfortable speaking with such critical detachment about his own songs, but under ruthless interrogation that showed absolutely no respect for the mysteries of the creative soul, Byrne gave it up. And here it is.

—Anthony DeCurtis

"DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT" (from *Talking Heads 77*)

I thought for a while that I should try to write songs from the completely opposite point of view from what seemed to be the easy way to write. The easy way would be hating the government, hating people's ordinary lives. I thought that was too pat, and everyone will like it automatically. I thought it would be more of a challenge to write a song that was sympathetic to people who live in the suburbs or who live in high rises and work in offices. I think my voice at the time wasn't quite up to it. The writing was fine, the song was fine, but my voice gives an edge to it that wasn't quite what I was trying to say. I wanted it to sound sincere and genuine and sympathetic, and I think it sounds like I'm being ironic.

"PSYCHO KILLER" (from *Talking Heads 77*)

That was the first song I ever wrote. I had been listening to some Alice Cooper records, and I thought I would write a song about a very dramatic subject the way he does, but then write it from a very *personal* point of view, from inside the person, and play *down* the drama of some dramatic event. I had an idea of what I wanted to say in the French verses, and Tina and her sister helped out with the French. After I did that, it gave me the confidence that I could write songs. People liked it. So after that, I more or less gave up on writing about such extreme personalities.

"THE BIG COUNTRY" (from *More Songs About Building and Food*, 1978)

I hoped that the description [of American suburban life] would sound almost clinical. Benign and sympathetic, but still kind of clinical. And then all of a sudden to have this extreme emotion attached to it ["I wouldn't live there if you paid me," etc.], I thought was kind of a shock, because there was nothing leading up to it; there was no reason given for it at all. I sort of had to do that song as an answer to the other one ["Don't Worry About the Government"].

"I ZIMBRA" (from *Fear of Music*, 1979)

That song was inspired by an African record I have called *17 Mabone*, and on the cover of it it has a picture of a car with seventeen headlights. I believe it might be South African, and it has guitars and fiddles and saxophones, completely unlike some of the

African music that's known, like Fela and Sunny Ade. It's a completely different genre. It's almost like reels, British reels or something like that. So we took that as a point of departure and Brian Eno suggested the melody after all the instruments and the arrangement had been recorded. And the words came from an old Dada sound poem. It seemed to fit, so there was no reason not to use it.

"THE GREAT CURVE" (from *Remain in Light*, 1980)

That one started off based on a riff we heard on a Fela record. That started off the recording process, but never made it onto the finished song. And the words were inspired by some reading I had done about the Yoruba religion, or whatever you want to call it. I guess it's not a strict religion; I mean, it doesn't have a dogma. It's based on the cult of the Great Mother, the Great Woman. The only thing we have left of that kind of sensibility is our idea of Mother Nature. That's the only hold-over from that, but it's a very, very old idea.

"ONCE IN A LIFETIME" (from *Remain in Light*, 1980)

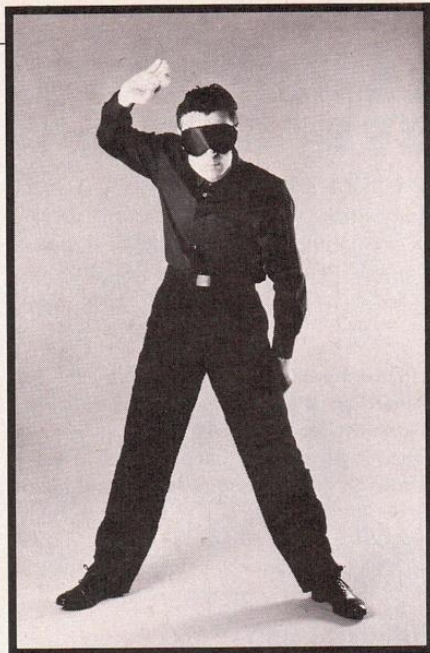
That's a song that juxtaposes the ordinary with the sublime. The choruses are about the sublime and submission and ecstasy, and the verses are about the ordinary and *not* about disliking the suburbs or something like that, as some people have misinterpreted. To me it's more about someone just being puzzled about the fact that they exist and they find themselves wherever they are.

"BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE" (from *Speaking in Tongues*, 1983)

The phrase "burning down the house" I first heard at a P-Funk concert, I think. And I think I might have misheard something else, but that's what I *thought* I heard. It seems to me to imply letting go, and giving it up, tearing things up. It's kind of an old idea, that to transcend things you have to smash them. In this case, burn them up!

"THIS MUST BE THE PLACE (NAIVE MELODY)" (from *Speaking in Tongues*, 1983)

That's a love song made up almost completely of non sequiturs, or phrases that may have a strong emotional resonance, but that don't have any narrative qualities. It's a real honest kind of love song, and I tried to write one that wasn't corny, that didn't sound stupid or lame, the way so many do. I think I succeeded; I was pretty happy with that.



We felt we had discovered a new synthesis, using very modern sounds and very modern working procedures—writing and improvising in the studio with studio sounds and what not—but with a lot of the structure in the music being based on ancient forms, and forms that were closer to the Third World. Those musical structures implied a very different attitude than was common in rock 'n' roll at the time, and implied a union between the mind and body, no longer a split between the two. So we felt the music was very transcendent and ecstatic, or it could be, and very ancient and modern at the same time. Oh, that seemed really exciting! To some extent, we were rediscovering the wheel. I mean, we listened to a lot of travel music and worked on things by layering little pieces of rhythm and sound and building up a rhythm piece by piece that in the end sometimes sounded like one good funk drummer, or one *mediocre* funk drummer! But it's very different to discover something by starting from the bottom and rediscovering it and putting all the pieces back together than by looking out the window and just seeing. It's like kids who take their car engine apart and then put it back together again. You have a very different relationship with the automobile if you've done that than if you just look at an old car and go, "That's a great car."

Were you ever concerned that there might be a kind of easy exoticism in your interest in African and other Third World music, almost a kind of cultural imperialism?

Yeah, sometimes it occurred to me that there is a danger in just being exotic for the sake of being exotic. There's a danger in doing something that uses Arabic scales that ends up sounding like Hollywood Arabic music. But then in the course of listening to a lot of pop records and ethnic records from other countries, *they're* more guilty of it than we are. If you listen to the most popular music in India, their film

soundtrack music, they use riffs from Western pop songs and somebody'll sing a little melody from a Bee Gees' song that then has an Indian backing to it. There's a story we heard about some groups, I think in Nigeria or the Congo, where Indian pop music was very popular. They loved the music, but they couldn't understand what the words were. So they'd redo the song and put African words to it and put an African rhythm into it. That kind of thing seems great; that's the way new things happen. As much as possible we tried to always acknowledge that that's what we were doing. We *were* stealing; we were putting this thing from here with this thing from here. We tried to give credit to our sources, which is a little bit different from other people taking, say, a Jorge Ben song and rewriting the words and having a hit with it, but never giving him credit.

How did you go about making the decision to expand the band for purposes of recording and touring?

We had toured quite a bit up till then, and I didn't want to do it again the same way. I either wanted to go out with a vastly different line-up, which we did, or go out with the same line-up but play, say, all new songs, or improvise on stage in front of people, find a way of improvising that didn't sound like jazz. I just didn't want to get into the rut of going out there with four people trying to reproduce a recorded sound and just slogging it out. One thing that helped was that the feeling of *Remain in Light* was very different from the others. It was much more about a lot of different sounds that popped in and out and a lot of people working together. It seemed much more a communal kind of sound and much more an ecstatic and transcendent kind of sound, which wasn't the kind of feeling that is generated by a small rock group on stage, generally. So in order to reproduce the feeling that the record was trying to generate, we had to have a different kind of stage presentation as well. And it worked. Whether or not you liked the performances, they did generate a different kind of feeling than what we had done before. To me, it wasn't rock 'n' roll anymore; it had gone over into some other category.

Why were the band members' various solo projects necessary and how successful do you feel they turned out?

Those (projects) gave us a chance to do things that no one would have expected to be on a Talking Heads record. The *Bush of Ghosts* record... we thought some of the numbers were quite danceable. I heard some of them played at discos, not the rock discos, the *real* discos, which was pleasing, although the record never really was all that successful. Malcolm McLaren really did that a lot better, doing something kind of bizarre, but then having a mass success with it. The record did go over real big with dance companies, I guess because

they're not quite so locked into a rock beat or a disco beat. They find other ways to move to it that aren't the kind of moves that you would do in a club. I think everybody—I don't mean *me*, I mean everybody in the business—was surprised at how good the (first) Tom Tom Club record was. Even *they* were. They originally thought they'd just make a single and see how it did. And originally their single was just to be marketed in France; it was "Wordy Rappinghood," and they had some French lyrics on it. But it did so well, they had time, and they kept working and came up with a hit record. And it was really amazing. I think it did everything they dreamed would happen, things they never expected. Chris listens to quite a lot of rap records, and so it was sort of a dream come true that people would take that riff from "Genius of Love" and rap to it. And it was a real honest success as well; it was a record that just took off on its own, fairly spontaneously. (Jerry Harrison's *The Red and the Black*) was a more difficult one. There were some good songs on it, although they weren't so pop-oriented as *Tom Tom Club* was. And so it didn't sell as well, but I think quite a lot of people liked that one.

Since you worked on *The Catherine Wheel*, it seems to me that the Talking Heads' live show has taken on a number of aspects of performance art.

That was somewhat influenced by things other people were doing, but mainly by the fact that I had seen some theater from other countries, from Japan and China, Bali, India, Africa, their own popular theater or rituals. I had to acknowledge that performing on stage is theatrical and dramatic; it's not just a bunch of musicians standing up and playing. If you just get up as a bunch of musicians and play, then that's the statement you're making. Whatever you do, you make a statement that's theatrical in one way or another. I realized that it was a very natural impulse to get dressed up for a performance and to act in ways that you wouldn't in normal life or on the street. From there I made the decision to start incorporating a greater awareness of the way I moved and the way I looked and the way the stage was set up, so that the performances got more involved with being a stage presentation.

Is that how you came up with the idea on last year's *Speaking in Tongues* tour of having all nine musicians enter the stage separately, adding one at a time for each song in the first set, and then having the entire band come on together for the second set?

Uh-huh. That was done specifically for that tour, because we did a lot of dates in outdoor amphitheaters, like Forest Hills in New York and the Greek Theater in L.A., places where the seats are in sort of a shell around the stage. The shows would usually begin when it was still twilight, so we



couldn't make a dramatic entrance with lights. I also felt that, although it's very nice to have an opening act and present a local band or a somewhat unknown band, they generally are not very well received. Although they think you're giving them a big break by having them open for you, they end up feeling lousy after the show because your audience can sometimes be pretty apathetic to something new. So we thought that we'd make it with no opening act, that we'd do the whole night. Then it made sense to just build the stage during the first half, and then, when it was dark, use the lights for the second half.

It also seemed a good way to introduce people to each of the sounds that each musician in the band contributes.

Yeah, I heard that. That didn't occur to me, but it does do that too. You really see how each element adds to the total sound.

You've made interesting videos for "Once in a Lifetime" and "Burning Down the House." What do you think about most of what's being done with rock videos? What is their purpose, aesthetic or otherwise?

Well the purpose for me, for the short ones, is to do something that, on one level, serves the function of promoting the song, the way all rock videos are supposed to do. And on another level, I would hope that it stands by itself as another piece of creative work that holds its own as well as the song, and that is independent of how well you like the song, or what the song means, or anything like that. It's sort of a parallel kind of thing. I don't think it's that for everyone. For some people it's really just a way to promote the song. In most cases, the performers or the writers of the song are not involved in creating the video. And I don't think *everybody* should be; some people should stay clear of it. Some bands who are great on record or great live should never do videos, because they don't need them. There are other bands who

may make songs that work very well on video, but are sort of boring on record. It would be nice if videos developed into a really separate creative entity, other than just being a support mechanism to sell records.

Have you seen any videos recently that seem to you to indicate some of the directions in which videos should go?

Boy, I haven't watched 'em in a while, so I'm not really hip to the latest videos. I haven't been to clubs, where they show a lot of them. So I'm really not qualified to say, especially since I just finished shooting one the day before yesterday for "This Must Be the Place." Generally, when I'm doing that, I stay away from watching them. I haven't seen the rushes yet, but I was pleased with the way it went. Half of it'll be Super-8 movies and home movies, and then the other half is slicker.

Is there any particular kind of music that you've been listening to lately?

Opera. I went and saw *Carmen* last night, the one staged by Peter Brook. I have one,

director—*Melvin and Howard* is what he's best known for so far. I'm doing some music and getting involved in the production of a long theater piece by the avant-garde director, Robert Wilson (who staged *Einstein on the Beach*). I'm doing the music for one section of it, and helping out with the stage direction.

It's generally believed that the upbeat feel of *Speaking in Tongues* had a lot to do with positive developments in your own life. Are you still feeling pretty good?

Yeah, I guess so. I guess so. Yeah. I have more confidence in my abilities and my work's been accepted over the years. So that's all pretty good. Of course, you never know how long it'll keep up. The music business is pretty notorious for people rising and falling.

On that note of caution, do you think much about the larger political and social framework in which Talking Heads, and all the rest of us, operate?

I'm worried about this country, I'll tell you that. The quality of life and the quali-



Byrne and Eno: Rediscovering the wheel but dividing the band

Parsifal, from the film by the German director, Hans Syberberg. When we were on tour I went to the Smithsonian, and they have this huge collection of country music, a boxed set of about ten records. It's really amazing stuff. It goes almost up to the present, but there's hardly a bad song on there, and there's some that are really quite bizarre! Ones I hadn't heard before. Sometimes it's really surprising how people's images have changed from what they did twenty years ago to what they're known for now.

What kinds of projects are coming up for you and the band?

If all goes well, we're going to film a show, and Jonathan Demme is slated to be the

ty of manufactured goods, and politically, everything seems pretty poor at the moment. When you see the manufactured goods and the way people live, when you compare this country with Japan, and the educational system and all those kinds of things . . . it's *hopeless*. Unless really radical things are done, this country is gonna be down in there with the Third World nations we're invading. I don't have any fool-proof solutions. From our point of view as a band, I suppose our political statement is that we're evidence of people working together and doing something that has, we would hope, some kind of quality in it, and yet isn't elitist. That's the best we can do as a band at the moment: be a living example. ○